

March 4, 2011

To: The General Assembly of the State of Connecticut  
Human Services Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee

From: Shirley Lebowitz  
96 Iroquois Rd.  
West Hartford, CT 06117

Subject: HB 6380 – Proposal to consolidate the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) into the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education

We live in a world geared to sight. There are approximately 13,000 blind people in our state. Most of the information about our surroundings comes to us through vision. The Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) has a team of well-trained orientation and mobility instructors who work with each client individually. Blind people can travel about safely and with self-confidence when they are properly trained.

Blind students in all stages of education are served by the BESB. Their counselors work with the pupils, schools, faculty and parents. The blind of all ages must be taught alternative ways to read and write. Specialized teaching methods, particularly the teaching of Braille, which is most important, are used.

BESB staff members play an important role in the training and placement of their clients for employment. The counselors are advocates working with employers. Blind people can be affective and reliable employees.

Skills in the techniques of daily living are also taught by the BESB teachers. Techniques of daily living such as taking care of their residence, food preparation, personal care, identification and labeling of products such as food and medications, money and many others to numerous to mention are most important.

An increasing number of seniors have become clients of BESB. Blindness need not be a reason for the elderly to feel they must stay home.

Individuals with severe sight impairment face a multitude of challenges. They require the encouragement and services of professionals in the field of blindness. The mission of BESB is to serve the special needs of the blind of our state so that they can reach their fullest potential. I am concerned that the services for the blind of all ages will be diluted, and the quality and quantity will be watered down and difficult to obtain on a timely basis if BESB is consolidated into the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education. Such a merger will send members of the blind community to the end of the line. Blind people prefer to be taxpayers rather than tax consumers. I urge you to vote **NO** on HB6380. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Shirley Lebowitz

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Dear Representatives, Senators, and Governor Malloy:

I am writing to urge you not to consolidate the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) as the governor's budget proposed in HB6380, and both S.B. 387 and S.B. 1012 would enact. I ask you to oppose all of these bills.

The educational adjustment to blindness, job preparation and placement that blind children and adults need in order to be educated, literate, productively employed and tax-paying citizens require training that is specialized and unique to blindness. They cannot be combined with those used by people with other disabilities, and the knowledge and experience of teachers and staff cannot be generalized into any other disability (not to mention several disabilities). At best, staff would be forced to become Jacks-of-All-Trades--of all or many disabilities--and proficient at none. At worst, staff would be forced to work outside the area of their expertise and improperly serve their clients: for example, teachers specializing in Braille would be forced to learn how to teach sign language.

Furthermore, the proposed consolidation of BESB would take the accountability for its success and stewardship of tax dollars away from an appointed and representative board and place it in the hands of a few, senior/career civil servants overseen by those with little expertise in judging their performance and stewardship.

When I moved to Connecticut, I immediately took a job in the profession in which I had already been working. I received my adjustment-to-blindness and job preparation from a vocational rehabilitation agency in California that worked--and for the most part still works--in a consolidated agency as is proposed for BESB. My counselors had little training in how to serve a blind teenager and college student; I had to present them with ideas for service and expertise that I gained by myself, turning them from what BESB counselors are with their years of specialized experience into simply a source of funding. Further, it was plainly obvious that the management directed funding to further internal interests and well-connected vendors regardless of those vendors' performance. That management had accountability to no one but executive managers with just a few more years on the job. It was only after exhausting a series of long, time-consuming, and wasteful appeals processes that I and others were able to get services if we needed something not in line with the managements' preferences--and only on a case-by-case basis for those who got the best advice from outside the rehabilitation system.

I think it important to share with you one specific example of the lack of accountability, preferential cronyism, and arrogance that the consolidated bureaucratic infrastructure with which I had to interface in California enabled. In the days before I began my job as a professional after college (and I will add here: a job I found myself and for which the consolidated rehabilitation agency only provided funding, such as for my college tuition), I served as one of two client representatives on a grant application scoring committee considering funding programs to help newly blinded senior citizens. The committee as a whole, the other client representative and I, scored one program more highly than a competitor. However, the senior managers disregarded our scores and awarded funding to the lower-ranked program. When I complained, I was told that the only thing I could do was to take my complaint to the agency's advisory committee and have it pass a resolution--which would, in the end, be only advisory and have no effect to change the managers' decision. The arrogance of the manager who told me that was sickening. There was no board to go to that would openly examine and override the blatant cronyism--not to mention the dereliction of the trust that the executive branch had placed in those civil, so-call "servant", managers. While I have seen in my few years in Connecticut solid integrity in BESB's management, I also know that that integrity is so solid because it answers to a board that is representative and has its clients best in mind.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter that critically impacts the lives of so many blind residents.

Nathanael T. Wales